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**SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA:  
AN ASSESSMENT OF STRATEGIC U.S. POLICY**

**CAPT PHILIPPE ALQUIER  
LTC MIKE BEASOCK  
MR. JOHN SCHMIDT**

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**REGION 1: SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA SEMINAR LEADERS:  
COL B. Shaw and MR. D. Wagner**

**CORE COURSE SEMINAR LEADER:  
Dr. Godwin - Seminar "L"**

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## **U.S. Interests in Sub-Saharan Africa**

The United States has fewer and less important interests at stake in Sub-Saharan Africa than in any other major region of the world. In general, the area poses little threat to U.S. physical security and well being. There is no regional adversary currently capable of posing a physical threat to the U.S., nor is one likely to emerge in any foreseeable future. Nor are there any raw materials or goods and services indigenous to the region so critical to U.S. economic and security interests that their loss would have a serious impact on our welfare.

The most serious threats to U.S. interests emanating from Sub-Saharan Africa are posed by a laundry list of troubles associated with the underdeveloped world, including drug trafficking, terrorism, environmental degradation, and disease. But these are irritants rather than substantial threats. And although the endemic poverty and internal warfare common to much of Sub-Saharan Africa gives rise to large-scale refugee flows, the region is too far from U.S. shores to pose a serious immigration problem for the U.S. While it is true that developments in the region sometimes engage our humanitarian instincts, as was the case during the famine in Somalia, this engagement is itself a symptom of the failure of African political and economic systems to meet the basic needs of their people.

Viewed from the perspective of what Sub-Saharan Africa has to offer the United States in a positive sense, the ledger is similarly unimpressive. Although Administration officials like to recite statistics that the U.S. exports more to Sub-Saharan Africa than to the former Soviet Union, this is more a comment on the poor state of trade relations with the Newly Independent States than evidence of strong U.S. - African trade relations.

While it is true that Sub-Saharan Africa does represent a very large potential market for U S trade and investment, the grinding political and economic impoverishment of the region leaves little ground for optimism that such a market will emerge any time soon

Although the positive and negative interests sketched out above can rightly be called marginal, at least by contrast with other geographical regions, they do have a common thread running through them. It seems to be clearly the case that the limited threats to U S. interests that emanate from Sub-Saharan Africa have their genesis in the political and economic failures of the region. These same failures also explain why the region appears to have so little to offer of a positive nature. If the current political and economic detritus could be replaced with good governance and genuinely market oriented economies the threats currently posed by the region would almost certainly diminish or evaporate and the continent would begin to play a more active and positive role in the world economy. For these reasons, the United States has an overarching, if still modest, interest in seeing Sub-Saharan Africa develop sustainable liberal political and economic institutions

Given the limited nature of direct U S. interests in Sub-Sahara Africa and the daunting magnitude of the task at hand, a casual observer might expect even less U S engagement in Africa than is actually the case. The fact is that the United States is actively engaged politically, economically and sometimes even militarily in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Secretary of State recently visited there and the President and Vice President have trips planned for the near future. The reason for this engagement has relatively little to do with direct U S interests in Africa but a very great deal to do with the fact that the United States is a superpower with self-accepted global responsibilities. There is a wide-

spread belief within the U S foreign policy establishment that preserving U.S credibility and influence around the world, including in regions that truly matter, requires U S activism around the globe, including in regions that matter relatively little Although our direct interests in Africa require relatively less activism than elsewhere, we have an interest in being more actively engaged in Sub-Saharan Africa than would otherwise be the case in order to enhance our credibility as a global superpower

### **Threats to U.S. Interests in Sub-Saharan Africa**

It is a good thing that the United States has only limited interests in Sub-Saharan Africa because the impediments to achieving those interests are truly daunting. As noted above, the primary impediment to achieving U S interests in Sub-Saharan Africa is the lamentable political and economic condition of the region The region is not only the poorest in the world, but also the most poorly governed. Although the physical environment of the region is a harsh one, and has exacerbated the human mistakes, the most serious problems faced by the region stem from poor choices made by the native governing elites in the years immediately following independence from colonial rule Almost universally these groups chose to establish one-party states with heavily centralized command economies This was justified on the grounds that democratization on the Western model would likely lead to chaos There was also the attractiveness of the Soviet model whose centralized political and economic rule fit the mindsets of those who wanted a clean break with the colonial West and which seemed to offer a fast track to economic growth

Unfortunately, the new systems did not work They invited massive corruption and increasingly arbitrary dictatorial rule In the rush to industrialize, the agricultural sector

was given short shrift. Sub-Saharan governments borrowed money to pay for factories and then had to borrow more money to pay for food. They went deeply into debt, but proved incapable of growing their way out. As their economies were driven down, ethnic tensions increased. The indigenous military forces, with no foreign mission, came to play the role of internal policeman and frequently seized power. Civil society began to erode. Almost forty years on from independence, the region is now a collection of broken down impoverished states, many of which are worse off than on the day they were liberated from colonial rule.

Although there are a fair number of recent success stories in the region -- including Uganda, Ghana, Botswana, Senegal and South Africa -- the overall picture remains bleak. In many countries, ethnic conflict is rife, civil society has all but collapsed and the physical infrastructure is in an advanced state of decay. So long as these failed states remain the rule rather than the exception, poverty and the threats to our interests that stem from poverty -- disease, drugs, famine and environmental degradation -- will persist and Africa will have little of positive value to contribute to the global economy. Although we can seek, and in many cases must seek, band aids for these problems, the most significant challenge faced by the region as a whole and by those who seek to help is to find a way to stimulate the rebirth of civil societies and the development of market economic structures that is the key to the future well-being of the region.

### **Opportunities for U.S. Policy - Getting More with Less**

The U.S. desire to take an activist role in Sub-Saharan Africa runs squarely up against the current trend toward declining resources for foreign assistance within the region and elsewhere around the globe. Indeed, current U.S. activism in the region seems

to fit poorly with spending capped at levels far below those that prevailed prior to the end of the Cold War. In short, there appears to be a distinctive and increasing gap between the desired *ends* and the *means* to achieve those ends in U.S. African policy. If this assessment of current trends is correct, then there will be significant and enduring tensions between U.S. interests and goals in Sub-Saharan Africa and the limited resources devoted toward achieving them. It is this tension that creates the risk that by trying to do too much, the U.S. may accomplish far less than if its efforts were more focused.<sup>1</sup>

How do we get more with less? Perhaps the best response to this gap between means and ends is to focus on ways to improve efficiency -- that is, to do more with the same resources. As Hans Binnendijk of the Institute for National Strategic Studies notes, "It is incumbent on the defense and foreign policy community to reinvent how to do business to take advantage of new opportunities and to phase down or out that which has become less important or less effective."<sup>2</sup> At the broadest level, opportunities to diversify and leverage the instruments of U.S. power to achieve foreign policy goals include

- Mobilizing assistance from others (i.e. International Monetary Fund)
- Coordinating action among the instruments of national power (i.e. Commerce, Defense, and State Departments)
- Working closely with concerned allies in Africa, in particular with the French
- Working with the private sector (i.e. non-governmental organizations, corporations)
- Devising new ways of applying instruments (i.e. FBI, Energy, United Nations)
- Phasing down the use of some instruments (i.e. USAID, VOA, military forces)

As a consequence of tension between domestic resource constraints and the U.S. desire to maintain a leading role in Africa, the U.S. has already adapted this approach and is pursuing a new form of engagement -- one that is largely defined in terms of *partnership*, both with the nations of the region and with outside governments, organizations and institutions interested in helping Sub-Saharan Africa. Susan Rice, Assistant Secretary for

African Affairs, best describes this approach as, "In the spirit of partnership, we must pursue our common interests and, in the spirit of mutual respect, we will differ where we must ..ultimately, only African leaders and African people can realize their vast potential"<sup>3</sup> In this regard, the U S actively supports the nascent efforts of Africans to take the responsibility in resolving conflicts, but is willing to pursue opportunities where playing the role of catalyst, technical advisor and honest broker will make an impact <sup>4</sup>

### **Current U.S. Policies - A Net Assessment**

The stress of internal chaos, conflict, and financial collapse has continued to occur in some African states. Militant ethnicity and unwillingness by the dominant ethnic group to share power is typically at the center of these problems. States that have utterly failed such as Liberia and Somalia will continue to flounder in their own incapacity unless rescued. As noted earlier, however, parts of Sub-Saharan Africa have made substantial progress towards democracy and have achieved modest economic progress. As the Institute for National Strategic Studies notes, "With continued attention from the international community, these positive trends should be sustainable "<sup>5</sup>

Despite the position of Sub-Saharan Africa at the bottom of U S foreign policy priorities, U S policies have had a demonstrable impact in many countries. Overall, U S policy does, in fact, seek to promote the development of democratic institutions and market economies, but has adopted an increasingly more focused orientation. For example, the USAID has narrowed its objective of "promoting democracy" to that of focusing on the development of specific civil society organizations, independent media, and representative and legal institutions.<sup>6</sup>



A major obstacle to the U S policy of promoting democracy and respect for human rights has been the division among Western countries and their lack of consistency in supporting democracy. Without a shared commitment to democratization and human rights in Africa that is universal and shared by all nations and organizations with influence in Africa, democracy is sure to be much more limited, afflicted, unstable, and uncommon in Africa than would otherwise be the case.<sup>7</sup> Currently, however, there is little sign of any U S vision and leadership that would make crafting of a coherent Western approach a priority.

A second observation of U S policy concerns the concept of *political conditionality*. While Africa urgently needs economic assistance, aid is typically wasted if it does not come with "political strings" that require it to be used constructively, responsibly, and accountably. U.S. policies that provide aid have historically not made much difference in Africa -- it has sometimes even delayed or even prevented reform from occurring. Aid works best when it is limited in time, is part of an overall market-driven strategy, and is provided as a "reward" for good governance.

A third observation of U.S. policy is that it tends to exclude support for regional initiatives. U.S. support must not only link with a coherent Western approach, but also with initiatives that emerge within the continent. There are some hopeful regional trends that merit support from multilateral institutions and major Western powers. One such promising regional initiative has emerged in South Africa and the 12-member states of SADC. These states have the potential to serve as models and sources for democratic energy and diffusion throughout Africa. This kind of regional architecture shows

promise as an economic and political anchor in the region and should be applauded, actively supported, and encouraged by U S policy makers

### **Recommendations for U.S. Policy in Africa**

Even if Africa is one of the biggest continents, U.S. strategy must take into account all of the other regions of the world in which we have strategic interests and where it has important commitments. Clearly, the U S. will have to make choices and Africa should not be a priority. However, the position of the U S. as a global superpower and its interests in the region continue to require active U S. engagement. The overarching interest of the United States is to see Sub-Saharan African states develop stable civil societies with active market economies. This is the surest way to ensure that the direct security and economic interests in the region are met.

We believe the U.S. should adopt a regional approach to building a democratic and market economic infrastructure in Sub-Saharan Africa based on three or four regional pillars. We would not seek to act alone, but coordinate our efforts with other concerned parties, including the EU, France, and appropriate NGOs. The first pillar is South Africa, which contains huge resources, particularly strategic raw materials and human capabilities, and dominates its region. This is particularly important because the collapse of its on-going transition to democracy would set a grave precedent for the continent and for the world as a whole. The second pillar is the Francophone countries of West Africa centered on Senegal, where the U S. should work closely with the EU and France in bringing civil society to the region. A third pillar would be Uganda where, thanks to its relatively smooth transition to democracy, it could be a stabilizing influence for the Great

Lake Region. Finally, as a fourth pillar, Ghana could serve as a stabilizing center for the Anglophone countries in West Africa.

Consistent with this pillar approach, the U S should not devote too much of its political and economic capital in the rest of the continent, other than for humanitarian interventions and in support of African or European multilateral operations. Rather, the U S goal should be to strengthen these regional pillars in the hope that they can serve as examples for their neighbors and use their own success to build enduring zones of stability. In carrying out this strategy, the U S should focus on the following elements:

**Political.** The U S should concentrate expertise and resources on building democratic infrastructures in the regional pillar areas and encourage them to work with their neighbors in encouraging the spread of civil societies. The emphasis would be less on organizing elections than in building sustainable civic institutions, such as an independent judiciary, a functioning civil service, and a free press.

**Economic.** In conjunction with our partners in Europe and Japan, as well as appropriate NGO's, the U S should focus financial assistance on the regional pillars and use this support as an incentive for the rest of the region, increasing involvement as they take concrete steps to develop civil societies and develop market economies. U S financial assistance should be targeted at promoting private foreign investment and assisting with debt relief and encouraging the development of export-based economies. The U S should also encourage Sub-Saharan Africa to develop economic institutions tailored to the material and social circumstances of the region, rather than simply copy a pattern of industrialization that may not be suitable to the African environment.

**Military.** Here too the U S should focus on the regional pillars as partners in helping promote stability in their respective areas. This is already the focus of the U.S. African Crisis Reaction Initiative, which should be sustained as an indigenous mechanism for promoting physical security and combating anarchy throughout the Sub-Saharan region. The U.S. should also work through the pillar states to promote the development of professional police forces, providing seed money for training efforts throughout the region. This could be combined with efforts to control drug trafficking and counter terrorism.

**Humanitarian Action.** Many of the world diseases, including new and deadly viruses such as AIDs and Ebola, originated in Africa. Therefore, it is in the U S. interest as well as in that of the region to target resources against the development and spread of disease. Regional medical facilities could be established in the regional pillars as bases for coordinated efforts to combat the spread and development of disease in surrounding areas. These could also serve as nodes for Sub-Saharan birth control efforts.

**Environment.** The U.S. could work with the regional pillars as staging areas for regional campaigns against deforestation and other threats to the environment. The U.S. can supply the training and expertise and encourage them to work with their less successful neighbors.

### **Conclusion**

Although the task is daunting, U.S. global leadership demands continuing U S involvement in Africa. By working with other nations, organizations, and institutions, and concentrating our joint political and economic efforts on building up the more successful regional pillars, using them as an example for their neighbors, and encouraging them to share their own lessons with others in their regions, the U.S. can play an important role in moving this vast and potentially valuable continent in a promising direction.

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